

Caring for the destitute: finding a calling

Ann Game and Andrew Metcalfe

School of Social Sciences and International Studies
University of New South Wales
Sydney NSW 2052
Australia

a.metcalfe@unsw.edu.au

a.game@unsw.edu.au

Biographical Details

The authors are Associate Professors who teach and write together in the School of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2052. They have written four books collaboratively: *Passionate sociology*; *The mystery of everyday life*; *The first year experience*; and *Teachers who change lives*. Additionally, Ann is co-author of *Gender at work* and author of *Undoing the social*, and Andrew is author of *For freedom and dignity*. They are currently working on a reconsideration of the theory of the gift.

Abstract

It is commonly assumed that the motives of carers influence the quality of care given. Many assume that good caring can only take place where the carer's motives are altruistic, where the giver has no desire for returns or rewards. Others argue that there are always subjective motives involved, that givers always receive something in return: apparently selfless motives mask the workings of a ubiquitous exchange logic. While the focus on the motives of givers has an important place in social analysis, it involves unrecognised ontological assumptions that make it impossible to understand genuine care. Whereas the discussion of motives presumes that there is always an acting subject who gives the care to another subject, we will argue that there are forms of giving that involve no motives and no subjects. From this perspective, altruism is understood as arising from a gift relation which is ontologically distinct from an interaction or exchange. To develop an understanding of the gift of care, we will draw on a research project on the phenomenology of the gift, focusing on a case study of care for the destitute.

Key words

gift, care, relationality, altruism, destitution, calling

Caring for the destitute: finding a calling

From gift exchange to the gift

It is commonly assumed that the motives and attitudes of carers influence the quality of care given. There are many who argue that good caring can only take place where the carer's motives are altruistic, where the giver has no desire for returns or rewards. Critics of this view argue that subjective motives and interests are always involved, that givers always receive something in return. Claiming that apparently selfless motives mask the workings of a ubiquitous exchange logic, these critics insist that caring can only be equitable if carers are open about the returns they receive.

This debate mirrors longstanding debates in sociological theory about the gift. Social theorists and philosophers from a range of traditions have followed Mauss in assuming that gifts are given by one subject to another and that ongoing social life depends upon their return:

To give is to show one's superiority, to be more, to be higher in rank, *magister*. To accept without giving in return, or without giving more back, is to become client and servant, to become small, to fall lower (*minister*).
(1990: 74)

Mary Douglas, for example, claims that "There should not be any free gifts. What is wrong with the so-called free gift is the donor's intention to be exempt from return gifts.... Refusing requital puts the act of giving outside any mutual ties' (1990: vii). A pure gift, Douglas says, is a social impossibility, and any claim of pure giving is an attempt to attain mastery over recipients. Derrida similarly assumes that gifts necessarily involve desires and intentions: "There is no gift without the intention of giving' (1994: 123); 'some "one" gives some "thing" to some "one other"' (1994: 11-12). The gift, he says,

supposes a subject and a verb, a constituted subject ... identical to itself and conscious of its identity, indeed seeking through the gesture of the gift to constitute its own unity, and, precisely, to get its own identity recognized so that that identity comes back to it (1994: 11)

Derrida says that pure gifts could only occur outside a world of subjects and objects (1994: 24), but he insists that such a world is impossible.

This focus on the motives of givers has an important place in social analysis, but it involves unrecognised ontological assumptions that make it impossible to understand genuine care. Such care does not come from altruistic motives because it does not come from motives at all. Whereas the discussion of motives presumes that there is always an acting subject who gives the care to another subject, we will argue that there are forms of giving that involve no motives and no subjects. We are challenging, then, the assumption that:

The activity of giving belongs to a group of activities that presuppose a subject, a dative, and a direct object: a giver gives a gift to someone who, through this giving, is invited (asked, urged, demanded, forced) to receive the gift (Peperzak 2002: 164).

We are arguing that the gift is not always gift *exchange*, and that there are not always distinct parties who give, receive and reciprocate. We propose instead that there are experiences in which there is a giving-and-receiving that is neither sequential nor locatable, experiences where giving happens, but not through the volition of any *one*. In other words, we are making a conceptual space for a gift *relation*, an experience of grace and gratuity where there are no distinct givers or receivers. From this perspective, altruism is no longer impossible or

unrealistic: it arises from a gift relation which is ontologically distinct from an interaction or exchange.

In his later work on hospitality and forgiveness, Derrida's argument shifts more in the relational direction that we are proposing here. Genuine hospitality and forgiveness are possible, he says, coexisting with and irreducible to exchange forms of these gifts. Genuine gifts are unconditional, gracious, infinite and aneconomic (2001: 34). While we share Derrida's interest in the gift as grace, we do not share his assumption that this is almost utopian. We will develop an understanding of the relational ontology, space and time which underlies everyday experiences of grace.

Relational logic is manifest in meetings (see Metcalfe and Game 2008). Whereas an exchange is an interaction between subjects, a meeting is a social form that suspends the time, space and ontology of subjecthood. We do not *meet* simply because our paths cross, and do not meet if we see the other in terms of our own desires for identity. Meeting does not involve identification or unity but, rather, is the experience of simultaneous difference and sameness that cannot be located in terms of insides and outsides (cf Merleau-Ponty 1968). In other words, the space of meeting is infinite: meetings happen in a here that suspends Euclidean locations and boundaries. To meet is to experience the gift of

presence. The time of meeting, therefore, is the now, the non-chronological present where time is not an abstract measure of life but is its unfolding.

Whereas exchange theory assumes that the subject is the source of the gift, relational logic recognizes a gift that arises through the meeting itself. It is gratuitous, gracious, without cause or source: it occurs ‘through grace – it is not found by seeking... Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one’ (Buber 1958: 11).

While the ontology of subjecthood is based on desire, relational ontology is based on love (Buber 1958). Far from being subjective or personal, love is the responsive way of being that characterises a meeting, not something we *do* but a state that we are *in*. To return to the issue of altruism in care, when we respond through love, we do not *do* good but goodness happens: our responses are what is called for because they did not come from us, personally, but from the life of the relation. Far from being the act of a subject, responsibility, then, is openness in a relation, a response to a call that is present, coming not from some-one and some-where but from the meeting.

To develop an understanding of the gift of care, we will draw on a research project on the phenomenology of the gift. In this project we undertook six months participant-observation in two charities and also interviewed people

involved in various ways with these organizations. This empirical material highlights the difference between care based on gift exchange and care based on gift relation. We will show this difference through a case study of Sue, a woman who set up a shelter for the destitute.

Sue: a case study in caring for the broken

For our participant observation, we chose one business-model and one community-based charity. We came across Sue as the coordinator of the latter, a drop-in centre for people who are homeless and/or have alcohol- or drug-related problems. The centre provides breakfast and lunch five days a week, feeding between 20 and 40 people every day; it gives clients a place to wash and store possessions; and it provides therapeutic, counselling and advocacy support. Although the centre is affiliated with a local church, of which Sue is a community minister, there is no missionary dimension to its daily activities, and it relies on donations from the broader community.

On meeting Sue, we were first struck by her good humour, her down-to-earth realism, her lack of piousness. In her early 60s, Sue was open, welcoming and full of life, yet with a calmness that knew all there was to know about pain. She

clearly loved the people she worked with, talking of them as if they were of her family, giving them hugs, paying full attention to them no matter how busy she was. When we offered to work in the kitchen, she said ‘No: I want you to sit and have lunch with everyone else and just listen’. Later she explained ‘People always want to do something, busy themselves helping, but that creates a distance. The most generous thing you can do is nothing. It makes you aware of your own vulnerabilities.’

As it turned out, our experience of meeting Sue was matched in the accounts of others, clients, supporters and co-workers.

Clients:

I feel that I can talk to Susan about anything. She is a bit like a mother to all of us, a Fairy Godmother, someone you can talk to and trust.

She's the glue that keeps the place together ... her heart's in it.

Supporters:

You only have to meet her to know the sort of person she is, and I always tell her that to me she is the Patron Saint of bloody [Suburb]. She is unbelievable, someone that is not judgmental. We have a good repartee between us, Susan and me, because I'm a bloody atheist

and I always tell her 'I'll win you over; I'll get you one day mate'. She would be one of the nicest people I have ever met, as a person, a human being. That is why Susan is like she is: she has been through it and she knows what the score is.

I remember walking up the stairs to the chapel and Sue was standing at the top, and I didn't really know her but knew of her and she just greeted me as though I was a long lost friend. And from that moment on I always just supported her in whatever she did because she was reaching out to the community for the disadvantaged and for those who couldn't speak up for themselves.

We donate quite a lot to different organisations and I'm always a little bit cautious because there is so much waste out there and with some people you don't quite know what their drive is. Sue personally contributes not just time but her own money and that's the difference between her and other people. She has spent her entire life working for other people, and I just really like her, she is real cool. She is really quiet spoken and she doesn't suffer fools, and she is the most cautious about asking people for stuff. She is the major reason that I'm there because I actually really trust her. I think her centres are fundamentally really, really, really important so I really want to get behind that and so \$50,000 is not a problem.

Co-worker:

I felt very very comfortable here from the very first time I came here. What attracted me to the place was Sue and the way she was really appreciative of me and really supportive and they were things that I was definitely not experiencing in other aspects of my life. Sue brings me to a level of equality so that I am able to be with and see these people as other human beings and not as homeless people or whatever it is.

When the supporter said that he trusted Sue, but suspected the drives of many charitable people, he was raising the question of motivations. Some of the people we interviewed were homeless, some were millionaires, some were co-workers, but all said that there were no hidden agendas with Sue: she was open and real, and what you saw was who she was. As well as commenting on her liveliness and passion, all remarked on how she made them feel secure, welcome and special. Their descriptions were of a person who has a calling, someone not motivated by personal desires, someone who hospitably accepts the world she encounters. Sue's story lets us see how she found and re-finds this calling.

Sue's story

Although Sue has lived in [Suburb] all her life, and her children grew up here, in her youth she attended an Anglican Church in another suburb. When she was 26 and *a little bit like a born-again Christian*, she was inspired by a sermon about working with your neighbours. She decided to throw herself into church and community activities in [Suburb]: *I came down here to the Uniting Church and a lovely old man greeted me at the door. He was so warm and welcoming and I thought, 'Oh, this is a nice place to be.' They were all fairly old and I was young, sort of out there, with my hand up in the air like some lunatic. There was something that threw me into that church and I don't know what it was, but it was probably to do with the liberated message that was being preached. I had come out of domestic violence and a breaking marriage so it interested me that this church didn't frown upon you if you were divorced or anything like that.*

Eventually the minister approached me and said 'Would you be interested in doing three days a week as a pastoral worker down here?', and I said 'I don't know what that is, as I've never done anything like that before', and he said 'No, no, you would be good at it. Come and join us'. At the time I was still married and I thought 'Oh, this is a bit risky', because I had a mortgage and I needed full-time work. So I went home and talked it out with my husband. He wasn't too keen on it but, I did it, and I gave up my job working in a kindergarten.

So that is how I actually began, just walking on the streets of [Suburb]. I went down to the park, talked to people and just sat alongside them and listened to their stories. Some of them

thought I was picking them up. (I used to be much more attractive in those days.) I just looked them in the eyes, people sitting there quietly, and just started chatting. Then I would say 'Oh, you know, do you want to come back up the road - I work up at the church - and have a cup of coffee and a chat?' And that's how it started. People used to come up the road with me and sit. We had a little coffee shop at the bottom of the church and we would make a cup of tea and just sit there and talk.

In no time I had a group of women meeting there with little children and they were all from fairly broken relationships and broken families. There were also a lot of people with mental illness, people in a pretty bad state that used to wander down into the park coming out of the boarding houses. I had never had experience with mental health and so I didn't know whether they were telling me the truth, and I just sat and listened to their stories. So it was a lot about sitting in people's pain, that is what it was, sitting in the midst of people's pain and listening and trying to decipher the truth from unreality. So I started two things. One was the women's group, and the other was working with the homeless and disadvantaged in the local area, and it was a bit of an eye-opener to me, and a shock, because I had always lived in the area and I hadn't seen the poverty there. I just thought 'What world have I been living in?'

Sue became a community activist: she lobbied politicians, fought evictions, held protest marches and rallies, briefed journalists, exposed the squalor and

exploitation in boarding houses. *So, I sort of built a name then in the area for advocating for people and standing up for their rights and all of that sort of thing.*

At this time Sue was working from the shopfront rooms of the church. *The minister in those days supported me wholeheartedly, but the congregation didn't. They got very uppity about my work. Sometimes when you are employed in a job, what they say and what they want are two different things. My work with the homeless was what they wanted but when it happened they couldn't cope with it. I brought the homeless back into the church and that was really just the end, because I brought them into their service, into their space, their sacred site. They thought they were going to get HIV or something like that and they freaked out. It was very painful for me because I was thinking that I was bringing them into a nice place, and this is what the church asked me to do, but there was hostility. The crunch came when they said to me 'I think you should go downstairs and have your coffee and tea with them there'. This is after the service. That made me ropeable. Then I was making excuses all the time for them with the people I was working with. That was a very difficult and very confusing time for me.*

I left the church for two years. I was so angry with them in that they had asked me to do something and I had done it and now what's going on? I was a bit disillusioned in my faith as well and thought 'Well, what is this all about?' I divorced my husband during that time as well, so everything happened to me all at once and then the church too.

I had moved out and was living in a little flat. It was very interesting, because all of the people that I had helped [breaks off]. This is very interesting, the church, a lady from my church, came to the door and knocked on the door and I opened the door and she gave me a box of groceries and left. What I really needed was for her to come in and talk to me, because I was in a state and she didn't, she left. But she gave me these groceries. So it was still very nice.

Over the next couple of weeks, I had knocks on the door from all the people that I had helped, that were the drop-in people that I had given money to and all sorts of things, and they were all coming in and giving me money, and giving me bits of furniture. 'Heard that you were not working and you are here and ...', and they have all been so kind that I couldn't believe it. That made me think about the two, the church and the drop-in people, and then I was walking down in the park and I see them and say 'Oh, the church has stopped all my, all of the stuff'. And so I thought 'Oh, that's not right. There is a bit of injustice here. Well, I'm going back'.

The good thing was that because I had stepped away from it, it gave me time to look at it and think about it, and when I came back I looked at the church people in a different way. I thought 'They don't understand me, I don't understand them and that's the way life is'. It cleared my thought processes. I thought 'Not everyone can sit with somebody smelling, but I can. I have to be realistic and think things in different ways in order to do what I want to do.' My passion was there but I knew I had to work this differently. So I went back in and they

said 'Oh', because I had changed of course, not radically, but I was calmer and quieter and so they employed me immediately again. I hadn't changed, but my view had changed.

That is when I started to move out of the church. I felt that if I could get a space a little bit away, they would not be as threatened. The lady whose father owned the local hotel liked what I was doing and offered to put a service charge on the meals so that I could raise the money to get a little property for a drop-in centre. Later I used to run raffles in the pub on Friday and Saturday nights to raise money for the rent. That is where the centre first started.

Eventually this activity brought Sue to the attention of the local council, which, with the church, in 19xx, purchased the house where the centre now operates.

At the time of our fieldwork, Sue was in the process of handing over the management of the centre to her deputy. Sue says that it feels like the right time to leave: *I've seen so many people that I've worked with over the years and they end up old in the service.* While she will maintain some role in the drop-in centre, Sue will move her main focus to a new service in a nearby suburb. *Because there is a very high need out there, I thought 'I'll go for it'. It gives me another purpose, a new vision, and it helps me to actually leave. It is not so hard.*

What is calling?

We will read Sue's story as an account of calling and passion, two words that she uses frequently and interchangeably, and which others frequently use to describe her. *This is my calling, it is something that I feel passionate about. It is within me you know, that is just me.* In the account above, Sue used the word passion at the crucial moment of her return from two years 'in the wilderness', a period that she described to us as an experience of brokenness: *My passion was there but I knew I had to work this differently. So I went back in and they said 'Oh', because I had changed of course, not radically, but I was calmer and quieter and so they employed me immediately again. I hadn't changed, but my view had changed.*

Sue's story hinges on the questions she raises here. What happened to her sense of calling when she *stepped away* for two years? How was this both a change and yet no change? What did Sue learn about what passion calls for? How did this change her ways of helping and giving?

In Sue's story, passion is a constant, and yet there is a change. We think that this paradox relates to the tension in the very word passion. When associated with obsession, drive, and goal-directed energy, passion is a matter of subjective desire and excess. By linking her change to a passion that is quiet and calm, Sue alludes to another and deeper meaning of the word. As its etymology

implies, passion has an element of passivity and suffering. In contrast to desire's future orientation, passion accepts and suffers the world; not emanating from a subject, passion is an energy that is both active and passive. Not something done or chosen by a subject, passion is something received, something that moves you mysteriously. It is an experience of grace, which 'means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one' (Buber 1958: 11). Passion's acceptance shows that it is in a gift phenomenon.

Another word etymologically associated with passion is patience, which brings together experiences of time and experiences of ill-health. Patience is the acceptance or suffering of time, the calm openness that makes it possible to stay in the present without being distracted by desirous expectations of outcomes and cures. The calmness of patience is hopeful, and not, as many people assume, an unlively condition: the hope in patience knows that it will find in tomorrow what it is not in a position to expect today, and yet find it as the fulfilment of the as yet unknown significance of the present. Whereas the exchange gift exists in linear time, working on the principle of expectation, patience exists in the present, having a faith that doesn't try to know what cannot be known. When Sue felt aggrieved that she hadn't received the thanks she expected, she had *already* lost her faith.

We can see now why Sue uses the words passion and calling interchangeably: both apply to both subject-based and relational situations. Calling can involve a willful decision to give your life to a cause, but, in its deeper sense, there is no-one who is called, no-one who calls, and no cause to be called to. In this deeper sense, calling happens in an open relation; it is a simultaneous giving-and-receiving. These two senses of calling and passion relate, in turn, to different understandings of caring: on the one hand, caring understood as the giving of a subject, and, on the other hand, caring understood as the grace of meeting.

We will now explore these ontological issues through an analysis of Sue's different experiences and understandings of calling. By pivoting her story on the two years of brokenness, Sue distinguished two forms of calling. When she said that there was both a change and no change, she was saying that it was her relation to given reality that changed. *I hadn't changed, but my view had changed.* She now had the capacity to be in-relation with woundedness, rather than desiring a changed reality, an elsewhere. Calling involves acceptance of what is, rather than a call to action. We need to be clear, here, that we are not saying that Sue overcame an inferior form of calling and progressed to a higher form. The logic implicit in the formulation 'change and no change' is inclusive rather than oppositional. The relational form of calling acknowledges that no one can escape desire, but insists that it does not follow that desire is always present.

Subject-based care

When Sue first turned up at the new church, she was, in her own words, *a born-again Christian*, looking for something to free her from the constraints of her old church, the violence of her marriage, and, we can presume, her own pain. *They were all fairly old and I was young, sort of out there, with my hand up in the air like some lunatic. There was something that threw me into that church and I don't know what it was, but it was probably to do with the liberated message that was being preached.* Given this desire, she was clearly tempted when the minister approached her with the offer of pastoral work. Here was a calling that offered her the chance to remake herself as an advocate for the 'homeless' and 'disadvantaged'.

Through her conspicuous zeal, and the approval of others, Sue hoped to prove that she was a good person. Having been chosen as the champion of the church, she would take its liberated message to the streets. This sense of calling is characterised by an heroic element, which Hillman and Moore describe in the following way:

Social problems waken the rescuing hero who cannot feel content until he has solved all problems, because his very existence depends on slaying monsters, cleaning stables, and saving cities. (Moore 1991: 142-3)

This heroism, Hillman and Moore say, is part of a puer complex: the hero's extravert activity is a defense against feelings of juvenile weakness, obviating the need to face and suffer 'the opaque symptoms that try our souls' (Moore 1991: 143). Sue would have been both emboldened by the heroic expectations that she projected onto the minister, and fearful of her own failings. *Out there* for fear of facing her demons, Sue tried to overcome her sense of weakness by proving herself through good work. The future was a distraction from the unacceptable vulnerability of the present.

Hillman says that one of the main puer characteristics is non-reflective activism: identity will be won by achieving goals and realising quests (1979: 113). This seems a fitting description of Sue as she established an identity by leading people into the church, battling with slum landlords, leading protest marches, getting in the newspaper. *So, I sort of built a name then in the area for advocating for people and standing up for their rights and all of that sort of thing.* In all of this, Sue was regarded as altruistic, a person who was selflessly fighting for

people who were less advantaged than herself. We will see, however, that Sue also had a personal agenda.

Sue's attachment to her identity as activist was revealed in the way she left the church and her pastoral work. Having given the church what she thought it wanted, Sue was indignant when she didn't receive due credit. *I was so angry with them in that they had asked me to do something and I had done it and now what's going on? I was a bit disillusioned in my faith.* This is a clear expression of exchange logic. Through her actions, Sue had hoped to control the future, presuming that if she delivered outcomes for the people she represented, she would receive recognition in return. This concern with recognition suggests that her care for the broken was conditional. She could not give unconditionally, without expectations, because she could not accept what was given. Her desire for guarantees was a refusal of gratuity; in other words, she would not accept the gift because this would be to renounce control.

When conditional, care involves judgments of what is and is not acceptable. This is exemplified in Sue's description of *the crunch*, when the congregation sent her and the homeless downstairs, out of their sacred site. She ascribes this to the disgust that the church community had for the homeless whom they claimed to love: the homeless were excluded because they endangered the

purity of the church. Sue's reaction was, in turn, disgust at the narrow-mindedness and hypocrisy of the congregation. Confused, caught between the two groups she represented, feeling that her association with one group diminished her in the eyes of the other, Sue tried to resolve the tension and clear her good name by leaving.

By leaving in this way, Sue replicated the congregation's exclusionary impulse. This oppositional logic means that people are either good or bad, either idolized or rejected; Sue was either in the church or out of it. Her disgust also shows that her previous high regard for the churchgoers was based on a fantasy of their being perfect. She was not accepting them as they were but was projecting the identity of good Christian onto them, so that this identity would be reflected back to her, through their regard for her. When they failed as good Christians, this reflected on her identity, which could be protected only by denying a relation with the churchgoers. In rejecting them for being judgmental, Sue was being judgmental, trying, like them, to establish a position that was safe from the real world of weaknesses.

Sue could not forgive the church people because she could not forgive herself. Her shame in having been associated with non-Christian behaviour was a claim that such behaviour was beneath her, that she was better than this, and better

than others. To forgive herself would have involved acknowledging that she was no better than others, that she could be accepted as the flawed person she was. She assumed that she was only acceptable when good.

The judgmental attitude that Sue had with the church people and with herself necessarily affected her relation with the homeless. In choosing *not* to judge the homeless, she revealed that at some level she was expecting less of them. This lack of expectation gave the relation a tinge of the a-social quality that Mauss identified when discussing gifts with no requital. Meant to minister to the homeless, Sue had, in Mauss' terms, put herself in the position of *magister*, someone who can rise above the need for return. Sue identified herself as representative of the homeless, voice of the voiceless, the goodness of her actions deriving from her apparent altruism. This selflessness, however, was a claim that she did not really belong with this group; accompanying them made her look good to the community *because* she was not one of them. Thus, there was in fact a disguised desire for return to the self. (We need to note that we are talking about a subjective state and gift exchange here: within the gift *relation* it is indeed possible to have gifts without having expectations and returns.)

Sue left the church, and she left the homeless. In leaving the church, she denied her own failure to forgive; in leaving the homeless, she denied her own pain

and brokenness. She cut herself off because she couldn't live with the reflections she saw in the eyes of others: *I was making excuses all the time for them with the people I was working with. So that was a very difficult and very confusing time for me.* In leaving everything behind, Sue acted upon the activist desires that had led her to join the church. The church had offered her the fantasy of a fresh start; leaving it offered her the opportunity of a neat conclusion. Both actions involved the denial of the present and the fantasy of closure on the past. Whereas the earlier case involved a fantasy of arriving, the later case was a fantasy of escape that provided nowhere to run to. As we will see, this difference was decisive for the shift in Sue's sense of calling.

Before leaving this discussion of Sue's early career, it is important to note that her descriptions do not all fit the model of the social activist. Something quiet and more profound was happening in her encounters in the park. She says *I just looked them in the eyes, people sitting there quietly, and just started chatting.* These experiences have a different logic: Sue was not looking at others (the homeless, the churchgoers, herself) as identities, but accepting them as they were. This ability to *just be* with people, whoever they were, later became the main characteristic of Sue's calling, but, at this early stage, she saw no difference between this and the activist mode.

Relational care

Sue's story pivots on the two year period of confusion and loss, in which she lost her church, her marriage, her job, and her faith. Sue withdrew from the world; closed in in a *little flat*, she closed in on herself and her suffering, cowering under and railing against the blows of life. Decisively, in this broken condition, she could no longer sustain a fantasy of bouncing back or overcoming adversity (Hillman 1977: 98-9), and it was this stuckness that allowed a change to come about that did not involve a fresh start, that involved, instead, an acceptance of reality. Far from recovering from brokenness, Sue emerged from this period when she realised she had been broken all along and would never recover; the period of brokenness ended when it became clear that it wasn't just a period, but was the human condition. She could then relinquish fantasies of perfection and accept the weaknesses in herself and others.

As Hillman says, this form of change is very different from the heroic model of fixing and overcoming. He describes it as

a shift from weakness and suffering to humility and sensitivity; from bitterness and complaint to a taste for salt and blood; from a focus upon

the emotional pain of a wound – its causes, perimeters, cures – to its imaginal depths (1991: 161)

A particular wound, Hillman says, ‘takes one into the archetypal condition of woundedness’ (1991: 161). What changes is not the ‘basic cry’, the wound, but ‘our connections with these places and our reflections through them’ (1991: 160). The wound opens us. It becomes, as Hillman says, the eye through which we gain compassion and insight (1991: 149). This is the shift that Sue experienced: *I hadn’t changed, but my view had changed*. Ontologically, Sue was now in-relation with the world, open rather than defended and defensive about her woundedness. Her change was a recognition of the changeless.

When in the wilderness, Sue felt she had no role, no importance, and yet she found the world coming to her. Even today, retelling the story, she has a sense of wonder about this experience. *It was very interesting, because all of the people that I had helped [breaks off]. This is very interesting, the church, a lady from my church, came to the door and knocked on the door and I opened the door and she gave me a box of groceries and left. ... Over the next couple of weeks, I had knocks on the door from all the people that I had helped, and they were all coming in and giving me money, and giving me bits of furniture... and they have all been so kind that I couldn’t believe it.*

Throughout her interviews, Sue spoke of *knocks on the door*. As a charity fundraiser, she is well aware of the vulnerability of those who door-knock: *you get a lot of rejections and abuse*, doors slammed in the face. This reminds us that the church people and the homeless coming to offer her help were making themselves vulnerable. By asking Sue to accept what they were offering, they were giving her the chance to reject them again, and, in the light of her hurt and defensive state, it is easy to imagine that she might have proudly rejected their offers. So, when she opened the door, she opened herself, giving up her defensive independence. In other words, her receiving was a giving.

In opening the door, Sue met vulnerability. The *unbelievable kindness* she mentioned was not a surfeit, of objects held out to her, but a lack, the lack of defenses of those at the door. This explains why, in her account, the homeless and the church people became interchangeable. Sue had previously been torn between competing allegiances to churchgoers and the homeless, but now, no longer attributing identity characteristics to them, she saw all those at the door in their naked vulnerability, and learned what destitution really means. No longer a subject position that applies to one group, it was the primal wounded condition through which all beings were connected.

When Sue opened the door, then, it would have been difficult for her to identify which side she was on. Was she inside or outside, the giver or the receiver? Was the door an exit or an entry? Who was host and who was guest? The fact that, in Italian, these last terms are bound in the single word, *ospite*, demonstrates that meetings suspend oppositions. The open door shows that opposing terms are always implicated in each other, that strangeness is always also on the inside. Sue was thus in a liminal state, between positions, in both positions, in no position. In this state she experienced an infinite tenderness, infinite in the sense that it would have been impossible to locate, to distinguish if the tenderness was wound or compassionate response. Sue was meeting her own vulnerability as she met that of others.

These liminal experiences are not only moments of suspended Euclidean space, but also moments that suspend linear time. The people at the door were those whom Sue thought she had left behind, but here they were, emissaries carrying news of a past, revealed in a future that is already present. They had returned, or, more accurately, they had never left, and Sue had never left them: what she thought she had rejected was, nevertheless, given. Despite having put so much energy into the decision to leave, this choice turned out to be insignificant, effortlessly set aside by life's unfolding. In that liminal moment, Sue experienced the stillness that reveals truths that are masked by subjective

choices and desires. Facing reality, there was no question of choices and yet, in this stillness, she was changed. The open door was the liminal stage of a rite of passage.

At the open door, Sue remembered (for the first time) what these people meant to her and why she had been with them. She knew now that this had nothing to do with her judgements of their worth as subjects. We can see what is involved in this remembering if we recall Sue's description of the epiphany that marked her first sense of calling: *I had always lived in the area and I hadn't seen the poverty there. I just thought 'What world have I been living in?'* At that time in her life, Sue probably imagined the call was based on a sense of otherness, the material lack experienced by an identifiable group. When she met people knocking at her door, her world was freshly revealed again. No longer was it a finite world of poverty that she could objectively survey; it was an infinite world which she knew through participation, a world whose shared poverty took away boundaries between self and other. While Sue had previously seen homelessness and destitution in terms of lack of possessions, she now understood it as the lack of defenses that allows for open relations. She realised that, when open to our own strangeness, we meet in primal destitution. This is what Sue had meant when, on our first meeting, she told us: *The most generous thing you can do is nothing. It makes you aware of your own vulnerabilities.* It is also what

Maritain meant when he wrote of ‘imperfection through which infinitude wounds the finite’ (quoted in Williams 2005: 21, see also Serres 1995: 20).

This analysis of Sue’s experience indicates how the relational concept of meeting differs from the identity-based concepts of unity and interaction. As an encounter with non-definable difference, meeting is an experience of infinitude and eternity. It is characterised by love rather than by identity-based desire. Sue couldn’t meet these people without loving them, but this is an impersonal and unconditional love. Thus we think that her description of experiencing love in the church congregation matched the experience that she had at her open door:

when I was broken as a person, I remember I was in church, the thing that I experienced was a sense of love, of being loved by something higher that you don’t know. I think that it is a bit of a responsibility when you have had that experience to actually share it with somebody. So, in a lot of ways, I think that my ministry is a sort of a love; it is looking at somebody and allowing them to sense that I love them. I’m having hard work saying what I mean, but when someone really loves them and cares what happens to them it doesn’t matter what they are. I don’t care who you are; I love you and I care about what is happening to you.

When Sue speaks here of the responsibility that comes with love, she is referring to calling in the relational rather than subjective sense. At the door, her sense of calling returned, but ‘as if for the first time’ – it was deeper, calmer. Calling no longer involved the activist urge to do something for someone else, because, in this stillness, there was no-one and no-where else. What has to be done happens in the call-and-response of the meeting, for to hear the call is to have responded. Call-and-response are gift terms, sharing the spontaneity and simultaneity of giving-and-receiving.

After these experiences had returned Sue to responsiveness, she returned too to the church, with a different perspective and a different sense of calling. *The good thing was that because I had stepped away from it, it gave me time to look at it and think about it, and when I came back I looked at the church people in a different way. I thought ‘They don’t understand me, I don’t understand them and that’s the way life is’. It cleared my thought processes. I thought ‘Not everyone can sit with somebody smelling, but I can. I have to be realistic and think things in different ways in order to do what I want to do.’ My passion was there but I knew I had to work this differently. So I went back in and they said ‘Oh’, because I had changed of course, not radically, but I was calmer and quieter and so they employed me immediately again. I hadn’t changed, but my view had changed.*

In this return, Sue doesn't seem to have experienced the shame of a back-down, presumably because she approached the door with open humility. The church people's response was as immediate and unquestioning as hers had been, based on the undefined wonder of the simple *Oh*. There was acceptance, on both sides of the door. As Sue puts it, she could now accept the church people for who they really were. No longer was she putting them on a pedestal; no longer was she judging their hypocrisy. She loved them, knowing that she could never *understand them*. Instead of trying to resolve differences, Sue could now live with them. She had learnt acceptance, and this is the gift that brings genuine forgiveness.

Through the ontological openness of the door, Sue had also learned the forgiveness and patience to accept her own limitations and failings. As she says, love heals:

I believe that love actually conquers a whole lot of things, of brokenness, because once you feel loved, you feel like you are OK, even in your brokenness. If you feel unloved you don't feel whole. So you grow through it and when you have an experience of love, it takes away all that bitterness and that anger and that is really important because the bitterness and anger makes you a grumpy, old, horrible human being.

When Sue was loving others, she was loving herself, accepting the whole of who she was. Her calling and capacity to give come from the acceptance of brokenness. This explains why people say that Sue has no hidden agendas, that what you see is who she is. Her brokenness, woundedness, is her calling.

Conclusion

Sue's story clarifies common confusions in the use of the word altruism. Altruism means an unselfish concern for the other. Within a subject-based logic, care for the other is presumed to involve a giving without any return to self. The critique of this model from within subject-based theory is that there is necessarily a return to self, and, indeed, as Sues' story shows, in the case of subjective states, this is true. However, Sue's story also exemplifies a relational logic that allows a reinterpretation of altruism and the possibility of other ontological states. From this perspective, relations are not exchanges between subjects. Care for the other happens through the meeting of self-and-other in which it is not possible to define self or other: giving comes from the relation rather than the subject. It is altruistic, selfless, because all participants simultaneously give and receive, without the ability to identify which is which.

It is often assumed that goodness or saintliness is underpinned by the subject-based understanding of altruism. The problem with this formulation is the assumption that, through the choice of good actions, the subject can overcome selfish motives. Sue's story gives a more nuanced, relational understanding of the ontology of goodness. When people describe her as a saint, they are not suggesting that she is perfect or has raised herself above others; they are insisting that she is real or, as one donor put it, a *human being*. Sue is a saint because she is able to accept her wounded, destitute state. Her life is not based on willful choices, but rather on a calling that she suffers or accepts. It is through acceptance of the calling, rather than the actions of a subject, that the self is suspended.

Goodness in the relational sense does not involve someone doing good for someone else. This is what Sue was alluding to when she said that the most generous thing you can do is nothing, just listen. She has faith that goodness will emerge gratuitously from this meeting. This accords with Murdoch's claim that goodness has the quality of 'naked' 'for-nothingness' (1970: 92). Goodness is not produced by a willfully virtuous subject but by response to the particularities of a given, and therefore gratuitous, situation. As Murdoch argues, virtue pierces 'the veil of selfish consciousness', and joins the 'the world as it really is' (1970: 93).

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank all the people we have interviewed and worked with during this research, especially Sue, while pointing out that they are not responsible for our interpretations. We also thank Ian Lennie for his great help, and Rosemary Pringle for her generous interest.

References

- Buber, M. (1958) *I and Thou*, Scribner's, New York.
- Derrida, J. (1994) *Given Time*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Derrida, J. (2001) *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Routledge, London.
- Douglas, M. (1990) 'Foreword' to M. Mauss *The Gift*, W.W. Norton, New York.
- Hillman, J. (1977) *Re-Visioning Psychology*, Harper Perennial, New York.
- Hillman, J. (1991) *A Blue Fire: Selected Writings by James Hillman*, ed by T. Moore, Harper Perennial, New York.
- Hillman, J. (1979) 'Puer's Wounds and Ulysses' Scar', in J. Hillman ed., (1979) *Puer Papers*, Spring Publications, Dallas.
- Mauss, M. (1990) *The Gift*, W.W. Norton, New York.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968) *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston.
- Metcalf, A. and Game, A. (2008) 'From the De-Centred Subject to Relationality', *Subjectivity*, 23: 188-205.
- Moore T. (1991) 'Introductions', in J. Hillman *A Blue Fire: Selected Writings by James Hillman*, Harper Perennial, New York.
- Murdoch, I. (1970) *The Sovereignty of Good*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
- Peperzak, A. (2002) 'Giving', in E. Wyschogrod, JJ. Goux and E. Boynton, eds *The Enigma of Gift and Sacrifice*, Fordham University Press, New York.

Serres, M. (1995). *Angels*, Flammarion, Paris.

Williams, R. (2005) *Grace and Necessity*, Continuum, London.